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ABSTRACT

This literature review examines Kurt Lewin's influence in leadership psychology. Characteristics of field theory are described in detail and utilized in analyzing leadership research, including the trait approach, leader behavior studies, contingency theory, path-goal theory, and leader decision theory. Important trends in leadership research are identified, suggesting that: (1) Lewinian concepts exist in varying degrees; (2) as a result, differential attention has been given to the leader, follower and situational components of leadership; and (3) field theory has become an increasingly dominant and fruitful theme. (Author/JAC)

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An Analysis of Theoretical Approaches in Leadership

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Field Theory in Organizational Psychology: An Analysis of Theoretical Approaches in Leadership

To say that the field of organizational psychology has been influenced by Kurt Lewin is certainly an understatement. The very core of organizational development is indebted to Lewin's work on action research, group dynamics and the development of the training group (Marrow, 1969; French and Bell, 1973). While many of these influences are of direct importance to organizational development practitioners, the aim of this paper is to analyze major theories and research trends in the area of leadership in relation to field theoretical themes developed by Lewin. I have chosen this area for examination for two reasons; it is a subject which Lewin himself studied, and it has been one of the most frequently researched areas in organizational psychology (House and Baetz, 1979; Mitchell, 1979).

Field Theory

Field theory can be best characterized as an approach to the study of human behavior which utilizes a constructive method that is dynamic, psychological, holistic, ahistorical, and mathematical. To briefly summarize:

1) Constructivism is a method of study which focuses on relationships rather than classification. It emphasizes the changing relationships between the object of study and its environment.
2) Dynamic refers to the forces that underlie changes in human behavior. The use of constructs such as valence and tension in field theory attempt to reflect the dynamic forces which account for changes in behavior.
3) Psychological acknowledges the need to utilize a phenomenological approach to viewing the subject's world. This

approach emphasizes that human behavior can be best understood from the viewpoint of the individual.

4) Holistic reflects Lewin's emphasis that analysis should begin by considering the total situation as a whole. Individual components cannot be fully understood unless the context in which they occur is considered.

5) Ahistorical refers to an emphasis on the present, although elements from the past may influence behavior if relevant to the person's current life space.

6) Mathematization stresses the concern that theory be amenable to symbolic representations. Lewin advocated topology as one solution however other approaches were not ruled out.

Early Work

Early research on leadership did not conform to field theoretical notions. For the first half of this century, leadership researchers busied themselves studying the personality characteristics of leaders (Stogdill, 1948). Several traits were found to be characteristic of leaders (e.g., leaders scored higher on measures of intelligence, extraversion, adjustment, dominance, and self-esteem than followers), however these were at best marginal results.

This strategy was classificatory. Identifying leadership traits was important, not the relationship between leader characteristics, the environment, and leader-group behavior. In addition, this approach took a static view of leadership assuming that if the leadership trait was found, then it could be treated as a commodity, identifiable through selection techniques.

The trait approach ignored the forces which contribute to leadership and took a physicalistic view of leadership through exclusive reliance on personality test scores. Implicit in this orientation is a historical approach which assumes the early formation of relatively enduring traits associated with leadership. Lastly, the only mathematical representations of leadership are personality test scores and their statistical association with leadership status.

Subsequent to the trait theorists, researchers at Ohio State and Michigan, many of whom considered themselves Lewinians, embarked on a search for the behaviors of leaders (Vroom, 1976). Through the development of various rating scales (e.g., Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire), leader behaviors were classified. As a result of this research, two predominant types of leader behaviors were identified (i.e., Consideration and Initiation of Structure). While numerous studies attempted to examine the relationship between these behaviors and leader effectiveness, few consistent results were found (Vroom, 1976). This line of work seemed radically different from the earlier trait research, however, differences are more apparent than real. First, the search for leader behaviors was still a classificatory approach and, despite attempts to study the "relationship" between leader behavior and leader effectiveness, no systematic efforts to understand the forces and events which led to leader effectiveness were undertaken (Fleishman, 1973). This research assumed leadership to be relatively static, maintaining that certain leader behaviors might differentiate effective versus ineffective leaders. If the right leader behavior(s) were identified, then leaders could be trained (e.g., Blake and Mouton, 1964) to act effectively. As in the trait approach, the phenomenological view of leadership was ignored and primary attention was directed at "objective" signs, leader

behaviors. In addition, these studies examined leadership independent of the situation. These researchers also implicitly assumed that since there are leaders who are high in consideration or high in structure these behaviors have their origins in early socialization, perhaps due to reinforcement history although this was not formally spelled out. Finally, this strategy only led to statistical representations of the relationship between leader behaviors and other variables.

Both of these approaches to leadership were virtually untouched by field theory. Given the early beginning and influence of differential psychology on the trait theories, this is hardly surprising. However, the lack of Lewinian influence on the Ohio State and Mighigan researchers is somewhat puzzling. While many social psychologists were carrying Lewin's influence to their work (e.g., Festinger, 1950, 1954, 1957; Heider, 1958), these researchers were apparently swept up in the tide of behaviorism in social psychology (e.g., Yale Communication Group).

Leadership: Dominant Themes

Since the 1960's, the three major leadership theories which have dominated the literature (Fiedler, 1967; House, 1973; Vroom and Yetton, 1973) all reflect Lewin's influence more than either the trait or leader behavior approaches. In the following analysis, I will try to explore the extent to which these theories are field theoretical in their formulation.

Contingency Theory

The influence of field theory did not reach the area of leadership research until the publication of Fiedler's Contingency Model of Leadership Effectiveness (1967), twenty years after Lewin's death. According to Fiedler (1967), leadership effectiveness is a function of the interaction between

leader personality characteristics and the task situation. This theory predicts that task oriented leaders are most effective in situations that are highly predictable; relationship oriented leaders are most effective in moderately predictable situations, and while neither leader does very well in very unpredictable situations, task oriented leaders are more effective than relationship oriented leaders. In addition, Fiedler (1978) has shown how an individual's life experiences (i.e., training and experience) can change the characteristics of the task situation by increasing its predictability or controllability.

Fiedler's theory clearly uses the constructive method. Leadership effectiveness is viewed as a function of the relationship between the person and the situation. This approach is highlighted in a training manual (Fiedler, Chemers, and Mahar, 1976) which focuses on the leader-situation match. Unlike the earlier trait theories and leader behavior research the mere classification of persons (i.e., leaders) is not of primary importance.

Contingency theory is dynamic in that underlying forces such as leader motivation and the social and task dimensions of the situation are seen as important contributors to group outcomes. Recent work by Chemers, Goza, and Plumer (1979) has explored the relationship between leader personality and group processes. Similarly, Fiedler (1978) has acknowledged the effects of stress and organizational turbulence on leaders and group outcomes in his model.

While Fiedler does not go into detailed analysis of the leader's phenomenological experience, he implicitly takes the leader's point of view when he states that task oriented and relationship oriented leaders react differently to situations of varied levels of control. Moreover, his position that the Least Preferred Co-Worker Scale measures a motivational hierarchy which

impells leaders to behave in particular ways also acknowledges the life space of the individual.

A striking aspect of the Contingency Model is that it requires that one analyze the situation as a whole. Put simply, one cannot look at any one best way of leadership. Contingency theory demands that person and environmental characteristics be analyzed simultaneously if one is to understand leadership effectiveness.

This theory is ahistorical. The leader's past is only important in relation to relevant aspects of the current leadership situation (e.g., amount of training or experience).

Although little effort has been directed at mathematizing the Contingency Model, Rice (1975) has provided a crude approximation to topological representations of the traditional Contingency Model as described by Fiedler (see Figure 1) and a more complex systems interpretation which he has developed (see Figure 2).

Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here

Path-Goal Theory

Another major leadership theory is House's (1973) Path-Goal theory. According to House and Dessler (1974),

> ...the motivational functions of the leader consist of increasing personal payoffs to subordinates for work goal attainment, and making the paths to these payoffs easier to travel...(p. 31).

House and Dessler (1974) identify two components of the situation, subordinate attributes and the environmental demands which press on subordinates. They acknowledge that while situational demands may also influence leader

behavior, those influences are not yet known. In its current stage, Path-Goal theory departs from the traditional view of leadership because the leader is not the focus of study. Path-Goal theory places its emphasis on follower characteristics and their surround.

Path-Goal theory searches for relationships between situational and personal characteristics. For example, House and Dessler (1974) state,

> ...it would be predicted that subordinates with high needs for affiliation and social approval would see friendly, considerate leader behaviors as an immediate source of satisfaction. Subordinates with high needs for achievement would be predicted to view leader behavior that clarifies path-goal relationships and provide goal oriented feedback as satisfying. (pp. 31-32)...

In addition, Path-Goal theory does not attempt to generate a taxonomy of leader, subordinate, or situational characteristics which act in isolation from each other. This theory can be described as a network of relationships between these classes of variables.

Follower satisfaction is clearly seen as a result of dynamic forces in Path-Goal theory. As mentioned in the preceeding quote, follower needs interact with leader behaviors. The theory also makes predictions concerning the relationship between leader behavior, task ambiguity and follower satisfaction and it assumes successful leadership to be a function of follower needs and perceptions.

Because House utilizes the life space of subordinates as the center of the leadership process, this theory can be classified as being psychological.

Path-Goal theory is also consistent with Lewin's notion that the situation as a whole must be analyzed. Follower motivation is viewed as a

function of the total situation (i.e., follower characteristics, environmental forces, leader behaviors). No one element takes priority. The interaction of these variables is central to the theory.

Congruent with field theory, this approach takes an ahistorical view of leadership. Only the effects of follower needs as they emerge in the present is emphasized.

Path-Goal theory appears to be very well suited to the mathematization advocated by Lewin (1951). The theory's name lends itself to notions of vectors and space. While there have been no formal attempts in this direction, the theory is certainly amenable to such work.

Leader Decision Theory

According to Vroom and Yetton's Leader Decision theory, different situations require different leader decisions for group performance to be most effective. Vroom and Yetton (1973) have postulated a set of recommended leadership methods based on a series of rules aimed at protecting the quality and acceptance of a decision. According to this theory, little attention is paid to leader attributes save that they should be flexible.

This approach seems to use the constructive method because leader effectiveness is viewed as a function of the relationship between the decision situation and leader behavior. More importantly, Vroom and Yetton (1973) emphasize characteristics of the situation. Their assumption that leader attributes are of indirect importance leads them to a taxonomy of situations which prescribe leader behavior and ignore leader characteristics. Upon close inspection, their theory emerges as more of a classificatory approach to leadership situations and behaviors.

Vroom and Yetton (1973) refer to rules for optimizing outcomes, but do not identify the forces which lead to these outcomes. While various

strategies for leader decisions are provided as options which would presumably fit leader needs, these needs are cast in terms of the demands of the situation. Consequently, Leader Decision theory cannot be considered dynamic.

Indeed Vroom and Yetton (1973) have created a theory of decisions for leaders and not one of the experience of leaders making decisions. Their approach does not recognize the leader's life space, but only the objective dimensions of the situation. Leader Decision theory cannot be considered psychological in Lewin's terms.

Similarly, Vroom and Yetton (1973) do not consider the situation as a whole. They attend only to the objective requirements of the decision situation.

Leader Decision theory is certainly ahistorical and on this issue it is somewhat compatible with field theory. However, it is ahistorical to an extreme in that the influence of the past is totally ignored, unlike field theory which acknowledges that salient or relevant past events can effect the present.

Lastly, Leader Decision theory, while yet to be presented in formal mathematical terms, could be described with a mathematical expression indicating that leader effectiveness is a function of the match between situational demands and leader decision behavior. I am not certain that the theory lends itself to the topological approach, which Lewin advocated because of its inattention to vector like forces.

Summary and Conclusions

In summary, both the early trait and behavioral approaches were largely taxonomic and shared little of Lewin's field theoretical approach. The

results of active research with these approaches were meager relative to the expended effort. In response, leadership theorists sought alternative approaches eventuating in the emergence of more field theoretical models. Both Fiedler's (1967) and especially House's (1973) theories reflect Lewin's (1951) constructive method and have led to active research and meaningful findings. While Vroom and Yetton's (1973) approach does not as closely follow Lewin's method, research by Vroom and his associates (Vroom, 1976) has found that leaders report that they behave in ways that are consistent with Leader Decision theory, thus indicating that Vroom and Yetton have at least indirectly tapped into the phenomenological world of leaders. However, in contrast to both Fiedler (1967) and House (1973), Vroom (1976) does not report any studies which explore how the leader behavior-situation match, as they define it, leads to group outcomes such as effectiveness, motivation, or satisfaction. This limitation in scope is likely to be due to the classificatory nature of the theory more than poor methodology or lack of creativity. For example, even though Vroom and Yetton's (1973) analysis of the situation is consistent with and perhaps more rigorous than Fiedler's (1967) concept of situational control, they have not been led to investigate how leaders react to different situations in either field or laboratory experiments.

Current theories have and continue to be useful to scientists and practitioners. In addition, a number of interesting questions generated by these theories need further exploration. For example, Rice's (1975) systems interpretation of the Contingency Model notes that leaders operate in a context and this approach offers a means of exploring the relationship of contextual variables such as the effect of past outcomes on current leader behavior. In addition, Strube and Garcia (1981) identified the application

and testing of the Contingency Model to coacting and training groups as a potential direction for investigation. House's (1972) Path-Goal theory, consistent with Rice (1975), looks at the role of subordinates in the leadership process which provides a stimulus for exploring subordinate influences in leadership (cf. Hollander, 1978). In addition, House and Baetz (1979) suggest the investigation of leader characteristics such as competence and dominance within the context of the leadership situation. Attention should also be drawn towards investigating the influence of leader and follower characteristics on leader decision styles and performance as a way of incorporating field theory into Leader Decision theory.

While a comprehensive integration of current leadership theories may not be possible, field theory is and continues to serve as a useful frame of reference for analyzing and guiding theory building. Only the development of qualitatively different approaches coupled with dissatisfaction in the field theoretical approach will lead to a major shift, an unlikely event in the near future.

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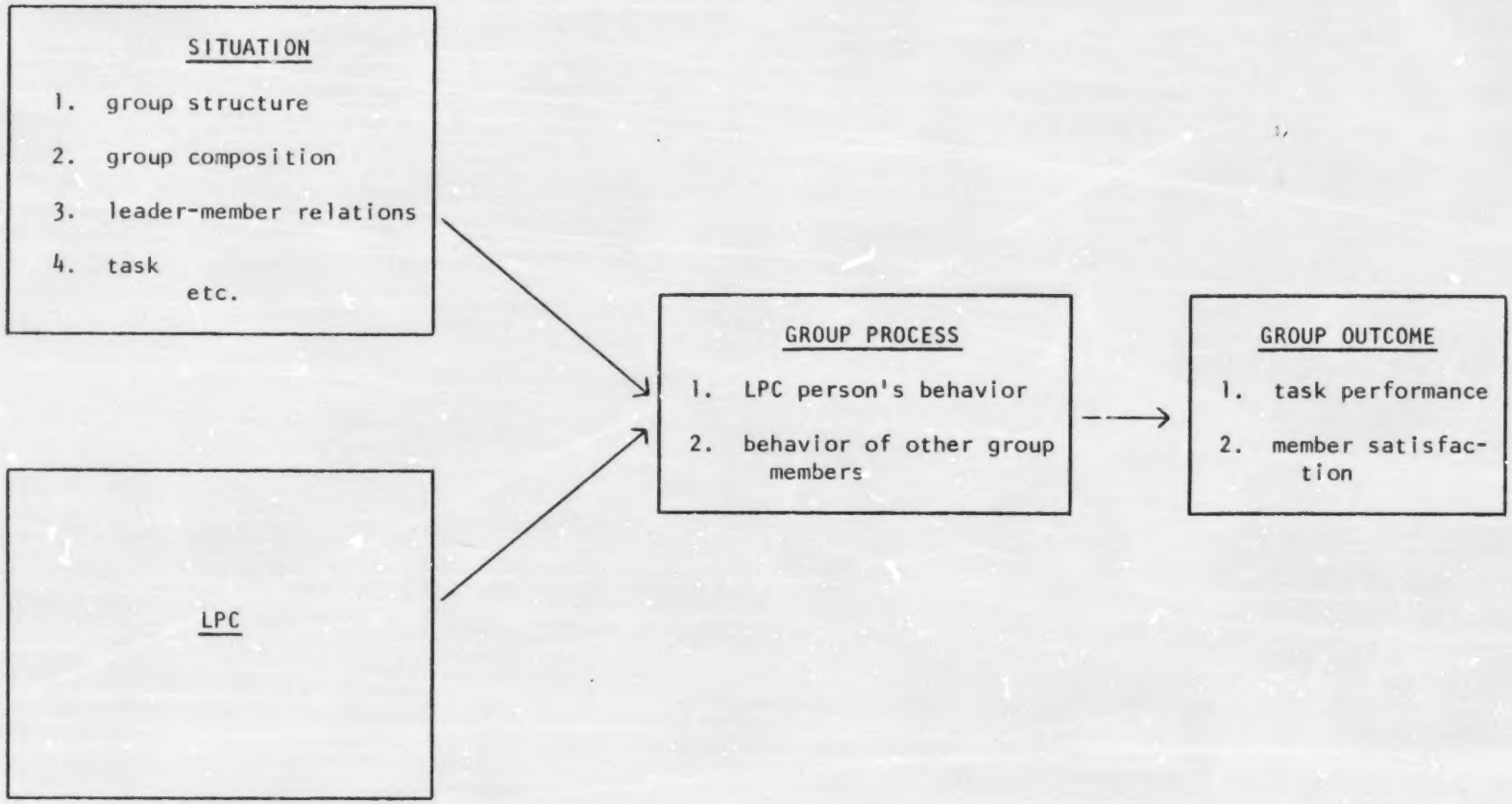

Figure 1. Linear causality view of the Contingency Model

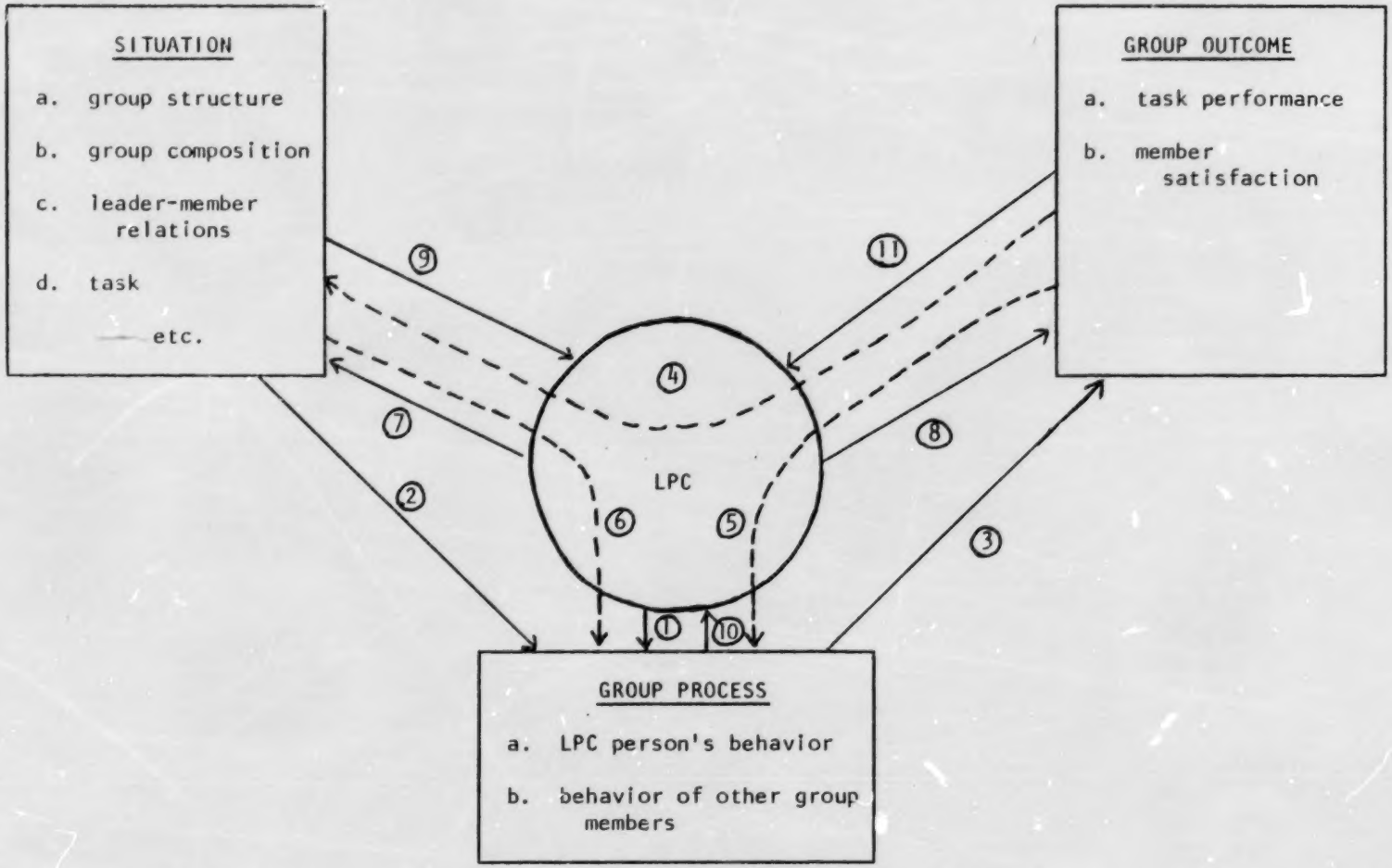

Figure 2. The LPC system